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ABSTRACT

Mini-concerts performed by older elementary school students were given in a kindergarten classroom to fill unscheduled time and to introduce children to musical instruments of the orchestra. Young players presented their instruments, explored their varied sounds, and shared their knowledge that the creation of music requires practice and effort, not only a desire to play. The concerts became significant to parents and younger siblings who participated in the events. Some school personnel took on new roles beyond their usual classroom involvement. Each 6-minute experience contributed greatly to an enriched kindergarten curriculum. (Author/RH)

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INSTRUMENTS OF LEARNING

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INSTRUMENTS OF LEARNING

Abstract.

The experiences created through concerts performed in a kindergarten classroom by beginning, young musicians, form the core of INSTRUMENTS OF LEARNING.

Young players present their instruments, explore their rich varied sounds, and share their knowledge that to create music requires practice and effort, not only a desire to play. The learning fostered by children involved with younger children takes on a unique importance to both groups.

The concerts become significant to parents and younger siblings who participate in the events. Some school personnell take on new roles beyond their usual classroom involvement. Each six minute experience contributes greatly to a rich kindergarten curriculum.

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Mini concerts in my Kindergarten class, played by bigger kids, were started to fill unscheduled time and to introduce children to musical instruments of the orchestra. Once children became interested, it seemed what was shared could be consider truly, the instruments of learning.

In the fall, children were beginning their school morning well before the official opening time of school. Some arrived ten to fifteen minutes early; almost everyone was ready to begin at least five minutes before the scheduled time, and we wanted to give each child an opportunity to arrive before beginning a group activity. One morning, to enrich the time prior to gathering together to plan the day, I arranged a few chairs around the phonograph and turned on a record. These chairs were quickly filled and others added to give additional places for the listeners.

Former students often dropped by to say hello and check over their old kindergarten room. When Markos, now a fourth grader, appeared carrying an instrument case, an idea came to me. I asked if, one morning, he would like to play his clarinet for my class, give a brief concert..

"I don't play very well yet, and I really don't have the time. " he told me.

We talked further. I explained that the concert would be for five minutes, and I'd ask his teacher to excuse his tardiness. He need only show his instrument, and play a short piece so children could hear and see a live musician. When referred to as a musician, Markos changed his tune and we made arrangements for him to come on the following morning.

I placed small chairs in semi-circular rows, set up a music stand front and center, and the room was formally arranged.

Elizabeth, her Mother and three year old brother Jonah arrived first and inquired about the chairs. I told them we were having a concert, and Elizabeth invited her Mother and brother to stay. They sat down, and as the class filled with children there were comments about the setting.

"What's going on?"

"Hey Elizabeth, if your Mom is staying, maybe my Dad wants to stay. I'll tell him."

"How come you did this, teach?"

Everyone was seated when Markos arrived. I talked briefly about the importance of an audience and the need to give a musician full attention and respect. I introduced Markos, and with the bravado of a performer, he showed his instrument case and the parts of the clarinet to the class. He assembled it being careful that children were able to see. He wasn't significantly larger than his audience, but being a few years older, he had a poise and a command of language five year olds lacked. Markos played three short selections, a scale and his highest and lowest notes, almost in tune. The children were in awe and enthusiastically applauded. When the five minutes were over, I commended the group for being so attentive. It was a delight to watch the children's faces as they concentrated on looking and listening.

Over the course of the next few weeks other big kids stopped by and I invited them to perform at a five minute concert. Soon, unsolicitated musicians appeared, and I began a sign up sheet. Our Tuesday mornings were scheduled weeks in advance with concerts a few times each month.

We heard other clarinets, a flute and cello performance, and most every portable instrument of the orchestra.

A favored part of the concert was guessing the instrument by looking at the size and shape of the case. A French Horn was certainly distinct from a violin, but the day two fifth grade girls appeared with nothing in hand, children were stumped. It was a curly headed five year old who said, "I know, sing! That's what they do. Their instruments are part of them." Each musician did some warming up before playing. When the singers did exercises, children were amazed. "Doesn't everyone know how to sing?"

It was the warming up time that triggered a discussion about learning to play an instrument. Ten year old Teddy made three attempts until he was satisfied with a note on his flute. He explained to the audience, with only a little prompting on my part, that sometimes he is ready to give up and not play the dumb old flute, but he really wants to be good at it, so he keeps practising and he can tell, he's getting better.

I watched the children's faces as Teddy spoke, and decided to use what he told them as the starting place for more talking. Five year olds seem to believe that whatever one wants to do, he does, or he quits, or Mom does it for him. We talked about dancers, readers, gymnasts and writers and the words used by the children were more important than knowing the shape and sound of an instrument.

Annie Lee said that her big sister quit piano cause it was too much work, but she'd never do that. She'd just try and try.

Billy looked surprised and told Annie Lee and the others that no one has to play an instrument. "If you don't want to, well, you don't. That's what I'm going to do."

It was Margaret with her glasses pressed against her tiny freckled nose who stated, "My Daddy told me that he got to play the organ at church because when his brother, My Uncle Chris whose big now, played baseball after school, he played the organ. He did it for lots of time and then he could play in church when he got bigger. He told me he had to learn, and that's what I'm going to do with a piano. I'm going to learn it."

This one discussion followed by many others throughout the year became important. The children seemed able to understand. We talked about how for many it took practising to write the numerals and have the number five go in the right direction. For some children it took practise to build a tall block structure, just as it took practise to be able to jump from the top step in the playground. Each new skill required some practise, different for each child.

One concert morning our musician was Mrs. McCarthy., the lady who swept the floor and emptied our waste baskets. I had heard her singing late one afternoon, as she worked, and I offered to trade with her. I'd sweep if she'd sing for us at a morning concert. She accepted. When I introduced her I explained that when she wasn't helping us in our school, she was a grandmother and a conductor of a church choir. The children were spellbound with her spirituals, and looked at her in a new way. She was so proud and pleased to have participated. Instead of being unnoticed, children looked for her to say hello, often refering to the day she made music in our room.

Parents and their smaller children joined the concerts and looked forward to being in the audience alongside kindergarteners. Small siblings loved being included in a "big school" activity, and little Jonah sat up front for almost every concert.

Over the course of the school year some parents participated regularly, others came only occasionally. The principal, other teachers, office secretaries and whoever had spare time, dropped in to enjoy the music on Tuesday mornings.

For the first few concerts I arranged the chairs, later children took turns being the stage hands and setting up.

So much more than recognizing instruments took place. Jaret, a short trombone player told the children that his instrument could make more sounds, and when his arms grew longer, he would play them. It was a tuba player who told the children that often she played an oompa, oompa, but without her sounds, the orchestra would not be as good. The bass player informed the audience that his was the most important instrument in the whole orchestra because he kept the beat so that the other instruments could sing in time.

With each musician and each concert there were rich stories to be told. I was touched by a note written by Ann's Mother who told me Ann had been terribly anxious and nervous before playing her violin in front of the children. She didn't know how to cancel the concert, so she came. Once she began to play she felt better and better in front of the audience, and playing her first concert was the very best day in her whole life.

There were only a few occasions when a musician was ill or simply forgot to come. On those days I asked for volunteers from the kindergarten to share some musical expression. We watched break dancers who used the record player for their music, pianists who ad libbed their own compositions, (they often needed help to end their performances) and several beginning pianists who had private lessons after school. One concert was made up of Suzuki violinists and on another morning a Mom brought her guitar and children sang along.

In the spring, Markos returned for a second engagement. He had practised and his playing was noticably improved. A few children recognized the change and our guest artist was able to explain that it was easier to keep in tune and make clearer sounds because he had been working and playing for a long time.

Concert audiences were not always quiet, and behaviors were not always acceptable. One week, when the restlessness and noise interfered with listening, I suggested we had had too many concerts and the noise was a way to tell me. I did not want the job of keeping order at a concert, that was the job of each child in the audience. They could decide by vote if there should be more concerts or if they should stop. (The concept of voting was still new to most of the children, and everyone loved the importance of it. Some couldn't understand to vote only once.) Continuing concerts won, but for the remainder of the year, I scheduled them every third week. I only needed an occasional reminder to quiet some unrest; usually they were a terrific audience.

Concerts seemed a natural way to assure a child he or she could return to kindergarten at a later time, in another role. I overheard kids

working at a puzzle, or building, talking about the time they'd come to make music in Kindergarten. It was Elizabeth who was certain that when her little brother Jonah was in Kindergarten, and she was much bigger and had practised a whole lot, she would be the musician and he could listen to her play.

I will certainly attempt concerts another year, knowing that to schedule them every few weeks is the most successful. I find this the most direct approach to show children through the experiences of other children, the need to work for mastery, and the pleasure and joys that come from a learning experience. After all, isn't that what we hope children will discover from their school experiences.

About the author:
Gloria Needlman is a Kindergarten teacher at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools. She has published in educational journals, for ERIC, created the first preschool science program for the Museum of Science and Industry along with three guide books for using the Museum with young children.